

Madrid is for Real

SPAIN. Real Madrid, tied for last place in mid-September, has made up for its early deficit and is poised to capture its 29th Spanish First Division title.

Back-to-back wins over challengers Deportivo Coruna and Valencia pushed the defending champions five points ahead of the pack before a 1-1 tie at Malaga left them three points ahead of Coruna in late January.



After a slow start, Zinedine Zidane, signed from Juventus for a world-record \$66 million last summer, has been brilliant.

"The soccer played here is enjoyable for the fans," he says. "In Italy, it was a very tactical game and, at times, ugly."

Real Madrid and Celta share the First Division lead in scoring with 38 goals in 21 games.

Raul leads Real Madrid with 10 goals, and a healthy Fernando Morientes is second with nine.

"It's easy to play in a team like Real Madrid," says the 24-year-old Raul, who already has 135 career league goals.

The key to Real's recent success was the return of Ivan Helguera in November from a broken foot suffered in preseason training.

Real has been almost unstoppable in Spain the last two seasons, since Helguera and Frenchman Claude Makelele took over as blocking midfielders behind the attack.

Zidane's slow start made him an easy target of the ferocious Madrid press, and the fact he was living in a Madrid hotel made it difficult for him to escape Real fans.

Zizou's performances in the Champions League, where Real has six wins, one tie and one loss, and La Liga in the past two months have silenced the critics.

Marca, the principal Madrid sports daily, has caricatured Zidane as the new Napoleon, ready to conquer Europe, and brandished him with a "Z" for Zorro.

Zidane is reluctant to be singled out among Real's many international stars that also include Portugal's Luis Figo, the 2002 FIFA World Player of the Year, Brazilian Roberto Carlos and Fernando Hierro.

"There are so many important players in this team," Zidane says. "I hope the team can make history at Real Madrid, as other players have done before."

— Paul Kennedy



Raul and Zinedine Zidane, celebrating after the Frenchman's recent goal against Deportivo Coruna, couldn't be happier in Madrid.